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HITLER AND HOLLYWOOD

Robert A. Rosenstone

Thomas Doherty. *Hollywood and Hitler, 1933–1939*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. 429 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$35.00.

Ben Urwand. *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013. 327 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$26.95.

As the editor of this journal and I agreed when talking about this review, every savvy academic knows that one good way of enlarging the enrollment of any class you teach is by adding the name “Hitler” to the course title. The word “Hollywood” may not work quite as well, but over the years I have found that it can stir more than a little excitement among students. Now we have two works showing that apparently the same strategy applies to scholarly publications. Not that either of these two books that link Hitler and Hollywood in their titles devotes a great deal of time to the German dictator. Both are largely concerned with the actions of bureaucrats in the Nazi regime toward the American film industry and the various kinds of responses these actions brought forth in Hollywood. Both also deal extensively with the film capital's products and power brokers, though they do so in dissimilar ways and with different results in regard to the meaning of the relationship between the U.S. film industry and Germany in the years between 1933, when the Nazi leader came to power, and the onset of the Second World War.

The backstory is not unfamiliar to anyone with a nodding acquaintance with the history of the motion picture industry. From the early twenties on, Germany was the major world competitor to the United States in terms of film production; it was also Hollywood's second largest foreign market, with a population that had an apparently voracious appetite for American films. Even before the onset of the Third Reich, German diplomats occasionally objected to the depiction of their countrymen on screen, particularly in films about the (first) World War, in which the brutal German soldier was a stereotypical figure. As might be expected, within a few weeks of the onset of the Third Reich, and under its Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, new policies with regard to film were instituted. In the first of them, the German film industry purged itself of virtually all its Jewish personnel, which meant

a large number of talented people—directors, producers, actors, cinematographers, and others who worked behind the scenes in a variety of technical positions. Berlin's loss was, to a large extent, Hollywood's gain: many of those who fled the country were among the most famous names in the German film world. A number—including directors Billy Wilder and Fritz Lang, producer Ernest Pommer, and composer Erich Korngold—ended up not only working in Hollywood but in creating some of its finest films from the mid-Thirties on.

The Nazi regime was not content with erasing all traces of Jews from its own industry. Soon enough it enacted a series of measures and practices that would affect Hollywood and help to limit the contents of American productions with regard to depictions of Germany, past and present. These included the demand that all Jewish studio representatives working in Berlin be fired; that films with positive Jewish characters be barred from German screens; that those with Jewish personnel (directors, producers, composers, actors) be prevented from screening in Germany unless their names were removed from the credits; and that any sequences that showed Germany in less than positive light also be cut. This naturally included any images that showed Nazi attitudes towards or treatment of Jews.

To obtain licenses to exhibit in Germany, as in other countries, Hollywood films had to pass through a censorship office capable of cutting works or banning them entirely. In the Thirties, Germany went beyond this normal practice, indulged in by other countries such as France, Mexico, and England, in at least two ways. First, by instituting a regulation establishing that, if officials did not like a film from a particular studio, they could ban *all* of that studio's productions from German screens. Second, rather than passively waiting to license films, the government installed a diplomat in Los Angeles—Consul George Gyssling—who was charged with trying to control and shape the contents of films even before they went into production. He did this by working with the Hays Office, which administered the Production Code put into place in the early Thirties in part to avoid government censorship of the film industry. All scripts by the major studios had to pass through this office, so developing and using contacts in the industry to keep up with proposed productions, the consul pestered the Hays office with criticism of scripts, backed by veiled threats about access to the German market. In an extreme case, Gyssling wrote threatening letters to some sixty people involved in a film of which he didn't approve; and while this action led to a protest from the American State Department and an apology from the German government, the consul in many other cases seems to have worked closely with the Hays Office, individual producers, and studio chiefs, playing a significant role in helping to alter or quash productions that would have shown anything negative about the current regime or its Nazis leadership.

Equally well known as part of the backstory is the fact that Jews were not only extremely prevalent in the motion picture industry at all levels of creativity, production, and distribution, but that five of the six major studios were headed by Jews. (The only one who was not Jewish, Darryl Zanuck at Fox, was often taken to be a Jew anyway). This has led to a question that has been raised many times over the years: how could these Hollywood moguls, most of them but one generation away from roots in Eastern Europe, allow representatives of a regime dedicated to ridding itself and the rest of Europe of Jews, turn their backs on the struggles of their co-religionists and accept the actions of Germany with regard to the film industry? How could they cut deals with a Hitler? Why didn't they simply withdraw from Germany? Are they not somehow implicated in the triumphs of the regime and, by extension, in the Holocaust? Such questions also lie at the heart of these two books.

Thomas Doherty's *Hollywood and Hitler, 1933–1939*, answers them in the equivalent of a sprawling widescreen saga, one that introduces a vast array of people and films in both the United States and Germany, with brief excursions to fascist Italy and civil war-torn Spain. As a way of explicating and understanding the broad social and political contexts in which the moguls made, or failed to make, decisions, the book contains richly detailed chapters that cover the following topics: the un- or semi-successful attempts of independent producers to make films on Nazi extremism (*The Mad Dog of Europe*, *Hitler's Reign of Terror*, *I Was a Captive in Nazi Germany*); the portrayal of Nazis in the then-popular newsreels (almost absent in regular newsreels, but particularly strong in March of Time productions); efforts to put films about the Spanish Civil War, in which a German legion was fighting on behalf of the rebel generals, on the screen (primarily Walter Wanger's *Blockade*); the images of Nazism in foreign, often Soviet, films, which were poorly distributed and seen by relatively few Americans; the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, a leftist organization in which some of Hollywood's biggest creative names—writers, directors, and stars—agitated against fascist and Nazi policies and propaganda; the investigations of the House Committee on un-American Activities, headed by Texas congressman Martin Dies, into propaganda and immorality in Hollywood, which became a laughingstock when its chair suggested the child star, Shirley Temple, was a subversive; the unsuccessful visits to Hollywood of Vittorio Mussolini, son of the Italian dictator, and Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler's brilliant director of *Triumph of the Will* and *The Olympics*, where, due in part to the agitation of the Anti-Nazi League, they were treated like pariahs and forced to quickly depart the town; and finally a nod to Warner Brothers, "the only studio with guts," which broke entirely with Germany early on, produced a series of patriotic American short subjects that called the tenets of Nazism into question and produced the first openly anti-Nazi feature, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. (Although this was not until 1939).

The broad picture Doherty creates allows readers to better understand the situation of Hollywood and its studio chiefs as they tried to negotiate the turbulent political and social waters of the Thirties. In the wake of Nazi and fascist triumphs in Europe, a new form of anti-Semitism was spreading widely in the United States. It was voiced not just by the German American Bund, the quasi-fascist Silver Shirts, or the ravings of popular Detroit priest Father Coughlin, but was widely dispersed from pulpits and some of the nation's press, with Hollywood in particular singled out by commentators as a kind of Sodom and Gomorrah, a place where traditional codes of Christian conduct were regularly flouted on screen by what was often seen as a "foreign" Jewish industry. Even leading Jewish organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League, along with various influential rabbis, thought it a period for Jews to maintain a low profile and not publicize their own conditions or accomplishments—hence their negative reaction towards a prestige film such as *The Rothschilds*, which provided a sympathetic view of the famed banking family. Such feelings were widespread enough at the time to perhaps have given pause to industry leaders, for anything overtly anti-Nazi might be seen as part of a pro-Jewish propaganda campaign. Ultimately, however, the decision to keep dealing with Germany was an economic one, the desire of three major studios (MGM, Fox, and Universal) to maintain a foothold in a once lucrative market just in case the current regime did not last. It was a decision by relatively rational men up against something they did not understand; Doherty describes it as "the natural befuddlement of cool business men against hot headed fanatics" (p. 39).

In contrast to Doherty's wide-ranging argument, Urwand approaches the topic with a narrow focus and a point of view that is clear even before one has read a word of the text. For two words of his title—"collaboration" and "pact"—are surely meant to evoke the dark and troubled days of the 1930s and to cast a negative light on Hollywood's leaders. The former term refers to "collaborators,"¹ those pro-Nazis waiting in the wings of various European countries (such as Vidkun Quisling in Norway) who worked to help the Germans take over their native lands or, like Marshal Petain in France, aided the occupiers in such tasks as sending Jews off to Auschwitz. The latter word, "pact," carries a distinctly fascist connotation, referencing agreements such as the Anti-Comintern Pact (between Germany and Japan in 1936), the Pact of Steel (between fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in 1939), and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939). And while the use of such terms may make for a dramatic title (we all want our books to be noticed, don't we?), they are surely misleading for the false historical parallels they suggest. However unwise or even repugnant the decisions of those moguls who decided to play along with German demands despite the

regime's anti-Jewish activities, the United States was not under Nazi occupation nor were the studio heads ever asked to commit crimes on behalf of foreign rulers.

Having undertaken a great deal of research in the archives, and particularly the little-explored German archives, Urwand is able to explore in great detail the micro-level of the struggle between Germany and Hollywood over canceling or editing individual film projects. This wealth of evidence, his main contribution to the topic, is important for those interested in details of the day-to-day interaction between bureaucrats, attorneys, and producers. But such details can be, at the same time, misleading. The letters and memoranda of the German Consul represent one of Urwand's chief sources of evidence, but the author seems to read them (and Hollywood memos) at face value and never considers that Gyssling's words (or those of any negotiator) may be tactical or self-inflating as well as informative and thus may well skew the portrait in a way that appears to exaggerate his influence on the decision-making process. Even at those moments when the author fails to find any evidence to show that Gyssling interfered with a particular project (*It Can't Happen Here*, for instance), he is nonetheless willing to suggest that even so, the Consul must surely have been a factor in having the production cancelled.

His desire to make a case against Hollywood's studio heads leads to a certain number of odd interpretations and even self-contradictions. In the chapter where he tries to show that Hollywood was itself making pro-Nazi films (at least works based upon a leadership principal similar to that of the Führer's), he uses examples such as King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread*, a work that generations of viewers, including the author of this essay, have taken to be instead a pro-Soviet and collectivist film. And in dealing with the struggle over getting Erich Maria Remarque's *Three Comrades* onto the screen in 1938, he awards to Hollywood an enormous power that even the most egocentric of the studio chiefs would never claim: that a truly anti-Nazi film could have changed history: "At this critical moment, when a major Hollywood production could have alerted the world to what was going on in Germany, the director did not have the final cut; the Nazis did" (p. 192). Apart from somehow equating the U.S. with "the world" (for certainly the people in most European countries well understood what the Nazis were about), he contradicts his own assertion in a prior chapter "that the outside world" knew early on the extent of the Nazis' brutality. Never does he bother to make the obvious connection that the people of the world relied on other forms of communication than film for their knowledge of the social and political movements of the day.

Given the way their works approach the topic of Hollywood's relations with the Third Reich, it is not surprising that the two authors make very different assessments of the behavior of the studio chiefs. Doherty makes his point of

view explicit in his acknowledgements section, saying that, as a historian, he has tried to approach the topic with humility, with a sense that one must see events in the context of what was known at the time and not through the lens of today: "To generations with a clear picture of the Nazis, it is hard to imagine anyone would ever have had dealings with them. Although I like to think that, had I been there as a mogul or moviegoer, I would have been both preternaturally farsighted and scrupulously moral, I am not so sure" (p. 376). Urwand, by contrast, exhibits no such sense of humility, but casts his work more like that of a prosecuting attorney out for a conviction. The quotation in the previous paragraph says it all: he accuses Hollywood's moguls of giving the final cut to the Nazis, with the implication that, had they not done so, Hitler would have . . . what?—been defeated without the need for a war?

Only by ignoring the larger historical context can Urwand make his judgments. And truly, today it may strike us as impossible—given what we know about the horrors of the war that the Nazis began by invading Poland and what we know about the following Holocaust—to think that our countrymen could have pursued normal business relationships with the Germany of the Thirties; but so, in fact, did big corporations such as Ford, General Motors, and IBM, as well as various American universities and the athletes, some Jewish, who participated in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, which were presided over by Hitler. But it makes more sense if we realize that, despite knowledge of the depredations against the Jews after 1933—and certainly up until the time of the widely reported book burnings in Berlin and the overt attacks of Kristallnacht in 1938—most Americans did not view the Third Reich as the most evil of the world's regimes; that dubious honor went to the Soviet Union or Japan.² This suggests that the criticism Urwand makes of Hollywood is really a criticism of a larger social order that was at once isolationist, blind to the larger threat of Nazism, and (to some extent) shared its beliefs in racial purity and the threat of others—Jews in this case—to the functioning of American democracy.

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1. It should be noted that it has been claimed that Urwand mistranslates the word, *Zusammenarbeit* as "collaboration" when it really means "cooperation," and that the accurate word in German would be "Kollaboration." See Gavriel D Rosenfeld, "Hitler's Willing Hollywood Collaborators," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, November 8, 2013.

2. Michaela Hoenicke Moore, *Know Your Enemy: The American Debate on Nazism, 1933–1945* (2009), quoted in *ibid*.